

November 22, 1965

The Editor
U. S. News & World Report
2300 N Street, N.W.
Washington 7, D. C.

Dear Sir:

Perhaps I would not have cared to react to Professor Shockley's interview in U. S. News & World Report for November 22, except for his standing as a Nobel Laureate and a colleague at Stanford. My silence could leave an impression that I share his outlook, which generally I do not. He certainly has some constructive suggestions - the essentiality of more research on genetic factors in social maladjustment, and certainly of more creative imagination than we now experience in planning social welfare and in education. However, I deplore his innuendoes about the intelligence of Negroes, and its purported hereditary basis, and the tone of his entire discussion about "bad heredity". Whatever good might come from his constructive suggestions is outweighed by the mischief of a pseudo-scientific basis for evading or distorting our social responsibilities; too many people will seize any excuse for these purposes. The plain fact is that we do not know the answers to his provocative questions, and in our present day context it falls between mischief and malice to make such a prejudgment in his terms.

There is also a common fallacy about genetic defect - that it is fundamentally irremediable. The whole concept of "bad heredity" is in any case a myopic one, since the high values of one social milieu are the vices of another one, and our milieu is constantly changing. The quantitative importance of hereditary variation for our social problems is, I repeat, quite unknown, nor will it be as easy as Professor Shockley implies to find out. As long as any racial prejudice or prejudgment lingers, would a Negro child adopted into a white family have the same effective environment as a white baby? Howbeit we can be sure of two things: (1) that under any circumstances the rate of genetic change of the population is very slow compared to the changes in our social institutions, and (2) even if we adopted a totalitarian answer on Shockley's premises, there would be plenty of residual variability to contend with. In these circumstances we can hardly neglect another prescription that Shockley overlooks - to work out the techniques of medical care, education and industrial and economic organization that can create incentives and useful careers for the whole wonderful variety of human beings.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

not published -
they don't do
letters to ed.

1966
+ Stanford Univ.